

Telephone interview with Frederick (Rick) Sautter, Jr., former officer-in-charge of HSL-33 (LAMPS) Detachment 4 aboard USS *Kirk* (DE-1087) during Operation Frequent Wind, April-May 1975. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 2 March 2009.

Where did you grow up?

My dad was in the Navy. When I was 4 he was recalled to active duty for Korea and then he stayed in after that. When I was 4 we moved back to DC then to the Middle East. I also wound up going to high school back here in California. So I'm really a native Californian, and most of my career I was homeported in San Diego.

How did you get involved in aviation?

I went to the Naval Academy. The summer between our sophomore and junior year we went to Pensacola and I absolutely fell in love with flying. But I still wasn't sure whether I'd do better in surface or aviation. When I graduated I went on a destroyer knowing that I could then go into aviation training, and if aviation didn't work out I could come back to ships. Whereas you couldn't go the other way around--go aviation and then try ships. Then go back to aviation.

That's how I got into the LAMPS [Light Airborne Multi-Purpose System] program. I spent 15 months on a destroyer in Mayport [FL] and made a WESTPAC cruise. Then I went into flight training. Another reason I went surface was that I knew that when I graduated in '68, if I went through flight training, Vietnam would be over before I could possibly graduate. As we said at the time, it wasn't much of a war but it was all we had.

Then I went through flight training and heard about the LAMPS program from the detailer. When I got out of flight training, he said, "You're about a year early for LAMPS."

So I said, "How about a tour in HAL-3?"

And he said, "I think we can help you."

Where?

HAL-3, which was the Navy's helicopter squadron in the Mekong Delta supporting the riverine forces. So I did my time in HAL-3 and came back and into the LAMPS program in San Diego. I got into HSL-31, which at the time was the only LAMPS squadron on the West Coast, a month after it had been redesignated from HC-5. So I was in on the very beginning of a program.

Were you assigned to *Kirk* first?

No. *Kirk* was my second deployment. My first deployment I was the maintenance officer for a detachment in USS *O'Callahan* (DE-1051). We deployed about 8 months after HSL-33 had been established, the first operational LAMPS squadron. So *Kirk* was my second deployment and my first deployment as officer-in-charge of the detachment.

How many personnel were in the detachment?

We had 4 pilots and 11 enlisted. There were two aircrewmen and two of each of the ratings--jet mechanic, metal smith, avionics technician, and electrical technician.

What was the role of a LAMPS detachment on a DE at that time?

There was a dual role. The primary role was ASW [Anti-submarine Warfare] and the secondary role was anti-ship missile defense.

Were you on both cruises aboard *Kirk*?

No. I was just on the '75 cruise.

When you flew from *Kirk*, did you patrol a certain radius from the ship looking for submarine activity?

Pretty much. Most of the time we did that for workups and did some exercises after Frequent Wind. We would go out and deploy sonobuoys and use radar and magnetic anomaly detection gear. But the anti-ship missile defense was also a big one because we had a passive ESM [electronic support measures] system, which was programmed for the Soviet threat--missiles and search radars and that kind of thing. We also would patrol and look for targets, for anti-ship missiles and their launching platforms, either surface or subsurface.

I guess business in that department was pretty slow at that time but I know from speaking with CAPT Jacobs and some of the other former crew, that you had all been part of Eagle Pull, the operation to evacuate Americans from Cambodia, even though *Kirk* didn't have a large role to play in that. Then you got some liberty in Singapore but it turned out to be very short. What do you recall about it?

They brought us around from Eagle Pull and up to the coast of Vietnam. Then *Kirk* was assigned to provide security for the salvage ship that was looking for the cargo door of the C-5 that went down with all the orphans.*

Then they dispersed the fleet and we were sent down to Singapore. On the way down there we started getting the daily intelligence reports from Vietnam. I read those on a daily basis when I was in HAL-3. They coded intelligence two different ways. It was A thru F for the quality of the information and 1 thru 6 for the reliability of the source. As we were going to Singapore, which would have been toward the end of April, on the daily intelligence report there was a line that said Saigon will be evacuated at 10 am April 29th, 1975 or that the communists will attack then, or something like that. But it was coded F-6--unreliable information, unreliable source.

I looked at that and told the junior officers on my det, "Holy shit! Look at this. This is when it's gonna happen."

No, they said, "We're going to be in Singapore for 6 weeks. But we were there for maybe 36 hours and we were pulled back out.

Why did your officers think the information was unreliable but you thought it was?

Because of my experience when I was attached to HAL-3 in-country. That type of information usually came true. There was just something about it, the way it was phrased, that grabbed me. One line on a message, you just don't remember, but that one I do.

*Flying the first mission of Operation Babylift, the evacuation of Vietnamese orphans, a C5-A had its controls damaged after the accidental loss of part of the rear doors shortly after take-off from Tan Son Nhut Air Base on 4 April 1975. Attempting to make an emergency landing, the aircraft crashed, killing 155 of the 314 people on board.

So we went to Singapore, they canceled liberty, and we went back off the coast of Vietnam. At 10 o'clock in the morning on April 29th the sky was dark with Vietnamese Hueys coming out.

I've heard that most of them passed over looking for larger decks to land on and there almost a feeling that you guys were going to miss out on the action.

Exactly.

Your LAMPS helicopter was out of order at that time.

We had discovered engine chips--metal fragments--on a chip detector. We pulled it and there was a pretty large fragment. You know, nothing was ever found wrong with that engine. I wonder if somebody sabotaged it, somebody put it in there so we wouldn't fly. That's interesting. Until this very minute, I had never thought of that possibility.

Was it in the transmission?

No. It was part of the engine. It was in an oil line on the engine. There are several magnetic detectors that are wired to a warning light in the cockpit. If a piece of metal lodges on the magnetic detector it completes the circuit and you get a warning light. We checked it and there was a chunk of metal on the detector. And we didn't have a replacement engine so we were hard down.

You had the bird in the hangar.

It was in the hangar, which of course, should have closed the flight deck but I knew we could land Hueys on it.

Wasn't it a telescoping hangar?

Yes. The nose of the aircraft goes into the hangar then the tail sticks out. The hangar then telescopes over the tail.

What do you remember about those first helos that landed?

We went out on the guard frequency--243.0 to tell the helicopters that our flight deck was open. We got the first one in and then once it had landed, it kind of showed the way. We went pretty constant for a while. We would land one and then move it over to the side. The crew would push it across the flight deck. While they were doing that, I had my avionics and electrical technicians in the aircraft pulling everything out of that we could. We pulled the battery, the radio, the navigation equipment, anything we could get out of it while it was being shoved over to the side of the deck and then we'd throw it over the side.

Was the first helo kept?

No. It was about the fourth one.

So the first three went over.

Yes. The reason we kept that fourth helicopter was it was supposedly the helicopter that belonged to the South Vietnamese Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was in pristine condition. We moved it over to the port side of the hangar and pushed it up to the bulkhead. The next one that came in, instead of coming in up the stern like most of them did, it came in

athwart ships from the starboard side. Its main rotor then clipped the tail rotor of that other aircraft.

How was the pristine helo oriented?

The boom was aligned with the center line of the ship. This other helicopter, instead of coming from aft forward, came from the starboard side and landed athwart ships. So it was pointing to the port side of the ship. And by doing that it got in a little too close and the main rotor clipped the tail rotor gearbox on the aircraft we had saved.

What was the condition of the refugees?

They were in pretty good shape but scared. It was a very orderly operation. In the cruise book there's a picture of me sitting on the deck with a Vietnamese pilot. The professionalism of these pilots . . . and that will be a recurring theme with me. I will tell you how professional the pilots were and also, when we get into the second part--when I went aboard the Vietnamese ship--how professional the navy was. One of the questions that has bothered me ever since is, how could this professional military lose the country like they did? The air force pilots and the navy personnel were a professional fighting force. They were maintaining those ships as we were going into Subic Bay.

One aircraft came in but we didn't know that it was all shot up. The pilot wanted to go back to Vietnam to pick up another load of refugees. We got him out and promised that we would turn his aircraft around. We would check all his oil levels and refuel the aircraft so he could go back. We encouraged him to go below and get something to eat and drink, relax for a few minutes, and then we'd launch him. So he went down to the mess decks.

When we plugged the pressure fueling hose in, it was like one of those cartoons where someone is machine gunned and then he'll take a drink of water and the water will come out from the holes in his body. That's what that helicopter looked like. We put pressure on the fuel and there was fuel streaming from everywhere because he had been shot up so badly. We turned off the fuel and threw the helicopter over the side.

When that pilot came back up to launch, he was pissed because we had thrown his helicopter over the side. We said, "Don't worry about it. There will be another one coming in." We'd never seen anybody shot up like that. Well he stood on the flight deck until the next one came in. Then he stood there while we refueled it, and then launched off. We never expected to see him again. Ten o'clock that night we get "USS *Kirk*! USS *Kirk*!, this is whoever. . ." And this guy had come back with another full load of refugees.

One of the things I learned in this operation . . . We hear about the quality of the American sailor but it was demonstrated to me in a huge way. The *Kirk* gave our detachment three guys--three seamen to help maintain our flight deck and hangar. These were not their top performers, as you can imagine. They were people they had written off and had given to us as manual laborers. "Let's see what the airdales can do with them."

We made them the landing signalmen for all of our operations. We trained them and then they were the guys who waved us in and signaled when it was safe to take off and that kind of thing. Those three guys who were supposed to be the dregs of the Navy stood there as these Vietnamese helicopters landed at night and the first time they had ever seen a ship. We would come in with no landing lights so as not to blind the signalman. When the Vietnamese came in and turned on their landing lights, these guys were blinded by these Vietnamese pilots who had never landed on a ship before. And they stood there every single time and waved them in. By

the way, after our deployment, all three of them reenlisted. That all showed me what positive leadership could do for these kids.

The last helicopter we got that night after this guy had come back, was an Air America helicopter with some Vietnamese guys flying it. We didn't want to throw it over if we didn't have to.

You know about the Cobra that ditched alongside after running out of fuel. We sent the motor whaleboat and picked those guys up.

Yes. I got to meet one of the pilots at the last *Kirk* reunion.

I don't know how much of this you can put in but I'm going to tell you what really happened. I came down to the ward room the next morning and they were eating breakfast. I met them and started talking to them. I said, "Listen, guys. I've got this Air America bird back there. It's positioned to throw over the side but we don't want to throw it over. You guys are Cobra pilots. A Cobra is a Huey. It's an H-1. You guys are out of the Training Command after I am so . . . I haven't flown a Huey in over 3 years so here's what I want you to do. If you take that Air America bird that I've got back there, you can fly it back to the *Okinawa* and that way your colonel won't be so pissed at you for losing your helicopter."

"Oh no, we can't do that. We're not qualified. That's a model we've never flown. We can't do that."

"Oh, come on. It's been over 3 years since I've flown a Huey. I'm way out of date. This is at least similar to what you fly."

"No, no, we can't do it."

I said, "Okay. Here's what I'll do. I'll fly it over there and I'll take you guys as my passengers."

And they said, "Okay, we'll do that."

"You're not hearing me. You're much more qualified to fly it than I am."

"No. No. No. We can't do that but we'll go with you."

They were willing to let you fly it even though you hadn't been flying one of those things in years rather than fly it themselves.

Yes. So we did. I took my most junior pilot, Scott Steele, because he was most recently out of the Training Command. To this day, Scott and I disagree on one detail. We got the thing started, got the rotor going, but I had trouble picking it up off the deck. I'd pull up and it just felt like there was resistance. In the military version of the Huey, I think the hydraulic button is on the center console, but in this one, the hydraulic button was up on the overhead panel with the circuit breakers. Scott and I disagree on who found the hydraulic button, but we found it. The guys who flew it aboard had shut the bird down and had gone through the checklist and turned it off. Anyway, we found the button and I flew them over to the *Okinawa*. By this time, the *Kirk* had drawn closer to the *Okinawa*. This was the morning of April 30th. We got out of the helicopter, someone from the squadron thanked us, and then gave us 5 gallons of ice cream, which is tradition for picking up a pilot. We got into the motor whaleboat and went back over to the *Kirk*. We heard later when we got into Subic from some Marines that for the next several days they were looking for the Air America pilots who had brought the Cobra pilots back to the *Okinawa*. They didn't know we had come from the *Kirk* and had already gone back to the *Kirk*.

Another thing. When we got back from the *Okinawa*, another Huey had landed. I figured out that was room on the fantail to put a Huey so I took that one and flew it around and put it on the fantail.

That must have been a hairy operation making sure that the rotors cleared.

Yes. I think it worked out that the rotor was higher than the flight deck. I think I set it down in a fore and aft position on the right side of the transom with the tail over the water so the rotor would clear the flight deck.

Following that, there was an incident concerning an LST with a Huey aboard. The crew of the helicopter was living and cooking in it. And this thing was full of JP-4. At that time the Army and Air Force used JP-4. The Navy used JP-5 for fuel. JP-5 has a flash point of about 140 degrees Celsius. JP-4 has a flash point of minus something or else. So JP-4 is much more volatile than JP-5. So the crew of this helicopter--the pilots and their families--were living inside. And the deck of this ship was just packed with refugees and so was the well deck. They wanted to get that helicopter off so they asked us if we would do it.

I went over and that was the hairiest takeoff that I had. I was still just getting used to the Huey again. When you lift a Huey off, the left front lifts off and the tail goes down and so it goes up with the left nose high. Of course when you apply power in any tail rotor helicopter, you have to counteract the torque. My fear was that I wouldn't control the torque well enough. As the tail would go down, the helicopter would yaw and I was afraid of hitting somebody on the deck. And we couldn't get the people back far enough away because there was just no room. So that was the one that scared me more than any of the others. I had to get it airborne without hurting anybody. But we did it.

Tell me your recollections of the Chinook episode.

The pilot came in but, being too large, we couldn't land him. He then hovered over the fantail and people jumped or dropped down onto the fantail. He dropped all his passengers, and then he moved over to the starboard quarter, as I recall. The pilot was sitting in the left seat. He pushed the stick to the right, the aircraft rolled right, and he jumped out of the aircraft. That was interesting. A navy pilot would have ridden the aircraft in and then swum out of it.

He must have been quite a pilot. He was flying that helo all by himself, getting those passengers out, and then he was hovering with his wheels touching the water. And then he got himself out of his flight suit. You're a helicopter pilot. How difficult would it be to fly a Chinook by yourself, and manage to get out of a one-piece flight suit?

You could do it. You take your hand off the control and wiggle around a little bit. I'm not taking anything away from the guy but it's definitely a feasible move.

And when he came aboard he was in his skivvies.

Yes. I had forgotten that. As you said that, I pictured him coming out of the cockpit.

I've seen photographs of the helicopter hitting the water. The rotors just exploded.

Yes. No one was hurt and there was no damage. It was a very spectacular feat. I looked at it at the time and wondered, "What the hell is he doing?" Any of us would have shut the aircraft down, let it fill with water, and then we would have swum out because that's the way we're trained. It just points out the difference between army and navy training. When I was on

my way to HAL-3 we went through Huey gunship training at Fort Rucker [AL] with the Army. They would assign two or three Navy pilots to one Army instructor pilot. We would get the aircraft in the morning, and then we would fly to the gunnery ranges which were out in the middle of nowhere. On the way to the gunnery range there was this huge lake surrounded by pine forest. The Army pilots would fly over these forests and do whatever they could to stay away from the water. We Navy pilots all headed right for the middle of the lake. Those were single engine helicopters. If we lost an engine we wanted to go in the water because in our minds it was a lot safer than going down through pine forests, going into the trees with that spinning rotor blade. It was just a whole different philosophy of life.

I would imagine that to these Vietnamese helicopter pilots, the thought of going out over the ocean in a helicopter was the furthest thing from their mind. They weren't operating over the ocean probably ever.

That's right. They were doing their first shipboard landings. Some of them had landed on LSTs in the rivers but it was their first time over open ocean.

So this was this CH-47 pilot's first water landing.

Exactly.

There were really two parts to *Kirk's* mission. The first part is what have been talking about--the arrival of the refugees by helicopter. The second part occurred after Armitage came aboard from the *Blue Ridge* and he outlined the plan for saving what was left of the South Vietnamese navy. Were you privy to any of that?

I don't recall any of that. I knew Armitage was there. I met him. I identified with him because I was [Naval Academy] class of '68. Armitage was class of '67.

Anyway, that's when the cruise changed its focus and *Kirk* was sent to Con Son Island. There was an incident on the way to Subic that I'm sure you remember. Chief Burwinkel had a patient with a compound fracture of the leg and he needed to be medevaced and you didn't have a working helo so you ended up building one.

That first helicopter we had saved, which had belonged to the South Vietnamese Chairman of the Joint Chiefs had been damaged by the very next helicopter that had landed . . . and I was really pissed that that bird had clipped the tail boom. The entire tail boom on a Huey is held on by four bolts. So we watched as the other helicopters came in. When we saw a decent helicopter and had a break in the action, I had my maintenance guys pull the tail boom off that helicopter and threw the fuselage over the side. We then slid the tail boom into the hangar next to our helicopter.

Once things had settled down, we installed the entire tail boom to the fuselage from the helicopter that belonged to the South Vietnamese Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. I actually did a test flight on it and then we did the medevac using that helicopter.

How complicated was the tail boom replacement procedure?

There's a coupling on the tail rotor drive that had to be synched up. Like I said, I had a Huey mechanic from HAL-3 in my detachment. We also had some jet mechanics. They figured out what the proper torque was on the bolts and got it done. The Huey was built for battlefield repair.

I think I've seen a photo of that helicopter. It looks like it had a two-tone paint job with the fuselage one color and the tail boom another.

Yes. I'm looking at a model of it we had built in the Philippines. They made the front green and back black. But it was two tone. The tail boom was a darker color than the rest of the fuselage.

What do you remember about that medevac mission?

Very little. It was really routine. It was getting him over to that ship and landing, having him taken off, and returning to the *Kirk*. I had done enough flying over the few days before that in a Huey so I was more comfortable with it. The medevac itself was anticlimactic.

Did you keep that bird to the end?

Yes. We kept that bird. We went into Subic with, I think, three Hueys. We trusted that helicopter more than we trusted the other two "whole" helicopters that we hadn't done maintenance on.

Once phase two of *Kirk's* mission occurred and you were escorting the Vietnamese navy, your job as a LAMPS detachment was over. I understand CAPT Jacobs gave some of your men the job of taking care of refugees.

All four of my pilots and a couple of my enlisted were sent to Vietnamese ships. I wasn't there for the rest of the journey into the Philippines.

Were you sent to one of those ships?

Yes. I was on the HQ-16.

What was your role supposed to be in going aboard?

We weren't real sure at that time. Later on we found out that we were going to raise the United States flag and the officers were to take command.

As the ships got closer to the Philippines, Marcos refused to allow the ships to enter Philippine territorial waters. While negotiations were taking place, the fleet made a wide circle to kill time.

That's what remember, a couple of days steaming in circles.

Was there a ceremony on your ship in lowering the Vietnamese flag and raising the American flag?

Yes. It was very emotional for them because we lowered the Vietnamese flag and raised our flag. It was bringing reality home. The way it was phrased, as I recall, was that the United States took back these ships under the terms of the lend lease agreement. I didn't know what the reaction was going to be. The conditions on that ship and the discipline and professionalism of the navy personnel was really something. They were chipping paint, they were oiling their guns, literally as we were going into the Philippines.

Do you remember the entry into Subic?

Yes. This is strictly personal. We had gotten through this operation and I was coming in on a Vietnamese ship. I had abandoned my helicopter and my detachment and the commanding

officer of our squadron had scheduled a visit to his detachments. So he was going to be in the Philippines as we pulled in. And as we pulled in, and I had flown these Hueys, I had landed Hueys with our aircraft in the hangar, and all of this stuff, and I went “Holy shit!” I’m either gonna be a hero or I’m going to be court martialed. He was going to see the *Kirk* coming in with all these aircraft aboard with ours in the hangar, no officer in charge, and as a matter of fact, no officers aboard because all four of us had been sent to Vietnamese ships.

Anyway, it worked out well. I got Helicopter Pilot of the Year because of it. I got the Navy League Stephen Decatur Award because of it. But as I came in to Subic, I didn’t know what to expect.

When you got to Subic, where did you go from there?

I went back to the *Kirk* and then we craned our helicopter off and we went to the BOQ at Cubi Point.

Did you stay in the Navy following this mission?

Yes. I retired after 24 years.

What do you do now?

I’m in the drug and alcohol treatment field. I do interventions. I’m starting a new business where we’re going to put neurotherapy--biofeedback and neurofeedback combination into addiction treatment centers to enhance their programs and help them be more effective.

It’s been nearly 34 years since all this happened, do you think about that time anymore?

Yes. I think about it periodically. It was a life-changing event. That whole operation got me a lot of notoriety in the LAMPS community. It was definitely a life-changing experience.

When I’ve talked to *Kirk* veterans about those events, many of them have reminded me that the ship was a man of war and they were trained to go out and sink enemy submarines. And instantly it was changed into a humanitarian assistance ship. There was no training, no warning; it just happened.

That’s true. My read on all that is that we just had a mission and we did it. Of course, I was at first concerned with the operational side of it when began the mission by taking those helicopters,. Landing, organizing, throwing them over the side, and being ready for the next one, that whole thing . . . Just before it all happened, I was running and sprained my ankle. So I lived that whole time wearing a flight boot strapped up so that my ankle wouldn’t swell. I hadn’t thought about that for years. For me, I hadn’t really thought about the *Kirk* being a man of war or being humanitarian, or any of that. For me it was a mission that we had and we shifted gears and were responding to a military situation at hand.

I want to thank you very much for spending time with me today.

My pleasure.